In Defense of Gaydar: Reality Television and the Politics of the Glance

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The reality dating programs Boy Meets Boy and Playing It Straight purported to illustrate the elusiveness of performing sexual orientation in a culture that increasingly understands sexuality as fluid. By highlighting stereotypes typically associated with both gay and straight men, the shows exposed the difficulties of determining sexual orientation with "gaydar". Both gay and straight participants were represented as equally incapacitated to identify sexual orientation. In doing so, the programs sought to advance liberal democratic conceptions of tolerance and equality. Employing Foucault's conception of the "glance," I explore the problems inherent in relocating "gaydar" to the small screen.

Keywords: Performativity; Reality Television; Glance; Gaydar; Queer Theory

Reality television has redefined how queer identities are imagined in America. From the eccentric roommates of the *Real World* to the mischievous antics of Richard Hatch on *Survivor*, reality television has produced a plethora of queer icons for popular consumption. Since the premiere of *An American Family* in 1973, U.S. audiences have watched cast members who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) on shows including *The Amazing Race*, *American High*, *America's Next Top Model*, *The Block*, *Big Brother*, *The Brini Maxwell Show*, *Gay Weddings*, *The Mole*, *Project Runway*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Road Rules*, and *Senior Year*. Viewers have witnessed "first hand" accounts of people struggling with HIV/AIDS, "don't ask/don't tell" policies, coming out, living as a queer of color in a racist and heterosexist culture, bisexuality, alcohol abuse, and same-sex relational

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issues. The dramatic appeal of such representations, intermixing sexual differences with broad humanistic identifications, has solidified LGB (and to a lesser extent "T") people as a staple of the reality genre.

Among recent programs included in the queer reality television family were two dating shows centering on the ambiguous performance of sexual identity. *Boy Meets Boy* (hereafter *Boy*) and *Playing It Straight* (hereafter *Playing*) challenged a single gay man and single heterosexual woman, respectively, to find "Mr. Right" from over a dozen bachelors, some of whom were "gay" and others of whom were "straight." Mimicking the popular series *The Bachelor, Boy* followed James Getzlaff over the course of six episodes as he sorted through a dozen "mates" vying for his affections.[1] Getzlaff was unaware that several of the men were heterosexual; producers disclosed this secret to him only when three contestants remained. *Playing*, conversely, focused on Jackie Thomas, a straight woman from Wisconsin who, along with the contestants, was told from the start that gay men were among her many suitors. The two programs shared many commonalities. On each show, there was a monetary prize for duping the person being courted; on both programs all of the men lived together (excluding Getzlaff on *Boy*); and on both shows the home audience did not know a man's sexuality until his time on the series had ended. Both programs had a relatively short run: *Boy* aired through the summer of 2003, and *Playing* was canceled after three episodes in 2004.[2]

More important still, both *Boy* and *Playing* appeared to defy cultural generalizations about sexual orientation by exposing the shortcomings of "gaydar," typically understood as the ability to identify a lesbian or gay man with no previous knowledge of their sexual orientation.[3] Often characterized as a "sensibility" employed by queers to find one another in a heteronormative world, gaydar has long been an intriguing, albeit elusive, ability to distinguish those in the "in group" from those in the "out group" (Goffman, 1963/1986). It transforms minute cultural cues into usable social knowledge for people who are in the know. Unlike "passing," which is a constructive strategy of immersion, gaydar is a constitutive tactic of projection. It is often unconcerned with truths and more interested in ideals—of who might (and often does) exist in one's midst. Gaydar is in part fascinating because of its inevitable inaccuracy. By smothering fluid identities with ontological expectations, gaydar eventually fails in its essentializing impulse.

Fox (2004) producers asserted that the men on *Playing* would simultaneously tempt Thomas' heart and "test her 'gaydar.'" She would "leave with love, money or her 'gaydar' in need of serious repair." Likewise, Bravo (2003) executives announced that if Getzlaff's "gaydar" were accurate and he picked one of the gay Mates, he would pocket $25,000. Presumably to enhance viewer interest, both programs were constructed and edited in such a way that the contestants embodied stereotypes generally associated with both gay and straight men. Not surprisingly, the assumed cultural associations were often wrong, with some of the most masculine men being gay and the more feminine being straight. The lesson was one that had been told to American audiences for decades: People should not jump to conclusions about the sexualities of others. *Boy* producer Douglas Ross asserted, "We very specifically

designed this show to challenge the viewer's preconceived notions about what it means to be gay and to be straight" (quoted in Andreoli, 2003, p. 53). Getzlaff first expressed anger at the producers for deceiving him; his frustration apparently subsided when he realized, he said, that perhaps the world would see gay men as "normal people with normal jobs [and] normal friends, looking for love and happiness just like everyone else" (quoted in Andreoli, 2003, p. 52). Despite the potential triteness of this message, it seemed as potent as ever. Queer critic Art Cohen (2003), for example, concluded that "apparently gaydar is an imperfect faculty for many of us" (p. 50). Queer television scholar Stephen Tropiano said *Boy* had the potential to "subvert the whole notion of how people conceive of lesbians and gay men" (quoted in Andreoli, 2003, p. 52).

In a culture immersed in fluid gender norms *Boy* and *Playing* tried to illustrate that distinguishing gay from straight was more than difficult. It was damn near impossible. The common denominator of these programs was not simply the desire to promote tolerance of differences among people, but to level such differences by challenging cultural assumptions about the efficacy of "gaydar." The rhetoric stemming from both programs—on Web sites, in gay and popular presses, and through promotional materials—suggested that neither the contestants nor the viewing audiences could decipher a mixed code of ambiguous signs of a person's sexual orientation. If the programs could exhibit the degree to which both gay and straight men shared elements of appearance, habit, and taste, this identification would advance a case for tolerance. Rather than present these similarities outright, each series attempted to preach diversity by eliding difference. By constructing but then destroying audience expectations, these programs subtly denounced the capacities associated with gaydar.

Boy and *Playing*, then, provide an opportunity to revisit debates in communication and queer studies about the role of everyday practices involving performativity, media theory, and the production of cultural identities (Bennett, 2003; Brookey, 1996; Butler, 1991, 1993, 2004; Dow, 2001; Sloop, 2004; Walters 2001). Scholars and activists alike should ponder the response of the LGBT community and its allies to programs that seem to support acceptance while simultaneously homogenizing communal practices that have historically helped queers survive (Gross, 2001). Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) argued that seemingly competing representations of sexuality and masculinity on television do not "force viewers to question hetero-normative assumptions of gender inversion" (p. 90). Embracing this logic, *Boy* and *Playing* suggested that subverting gendered norms was best accomplished by employing a wide array of male representations and creating a sense of equity among the players. Producers visually insisted that all people—gay or straight—were equally incapacitated when it comes to this cultural "radar." The programs leveled the playing field by showing a recalcitrance (or unreliability) to identification within the queer community equivalent to the abilities of heterosexuals to recognize gay people. This neo-liberal impulse in reality television to position all citizens as equal (Ouellette, 2004) comes at the expense of understanding how specific practices are constituted and the ways in which those practices assist gays and lesbians in quotidian

survival. Rather than illustrate how multiple sexual orientations are available to people and how those variations produce a myriad of identifications and relations, *Boy* and *Playing* problematically encouraged heterosexual contestants to assert that they had gained insight into queer culture simply because they hid their own sexual orientation for an abbreviated amount of time (as on *Boy*) or were not presumed to be "straight" (as on *Playing*).

Despite the constructed sexual fluidity of the contestants, both *Boy* and *Playing* ultimately reinforced the viability of gaydar, given that, at the end of both series, the contestants finished with the "right" people. Getzlaff selected a gay man and Thomas a straight guy. Despite the ambiguous performative potential in each show, the programs subtly fortified standard notions of sexual essentialism, upholding the insinuated abilities of the players to find the people that they were "supposed" to be with. While masculinity was positioned as performatively fluid, sexuality remained ontologically secured, reassuring the audience that times may change, but sexualities do not.

Exploring gaydar as an important strategy in the process of queer world-making (Berlant & Warner, 1998) does not imply that it is a tool at the universal disposal of any lesbian or gay man. I do not propose that queers have an innate ability that all heterosexuals lack. It is erroneous to suppose that gaydar can be scientifically ascertained (Bailey, 2003). Nonetheless, gaydar is not a myth so much as it is a dialogical and cultural phenomenon not easily explained by reductive notions of identity. Indeed, at times, gaydar appears to be a conceptual contradiction, depending on both the performative aspects of identity and the ontological rudiments of a particular queer culture. However, as Butler (2004) suggests, such seeming paradoxes provide the conditions of possibility; identity finds itself "at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them" (p. 3). For those who live on the margins of culture, such possibilities are not a luxury. They are, in Butler's words, "as crucial as bread" (p. 29).

Constituting "Gaydar"

Gaydar is unstable and fallible, never capturing the essence of the other, but always seeking dialogical affirmation for the identities being sought. As mentioned above, gaydar shares the impulses of passing in that it is a strategy of survival. Unlike passing, however, gaydar does not strive for assimilation so much as it isolates the individual from the masses to mark and constitute a specified identity. It surveys subjects, seeking clues that substantiate feelings that can never be fully articulated. While gaydar is not innate, the constituted projections of gaydar are not altogether imagined. It is driven by the experience of the social actor, who recognizes signs and determines if the reiteration of certain norms on specific bodies might harbor *potential* for queer identification. Importantly, gaydar inevitably essentializes, but always with the *hopes* of making that which is otherwise unnoticed possible.

Gaydar's seemingly ontological knowledge derives its power from a reiteration that mirrors Foucault's (1973/1994) discussion of the "glance." In *Birth of the Clinic,* his study of medical knowledge and power in institutional spaces, Foucault distinguished between the "gaze" of the doctors and the "glance" produced by the repetition of their experiences as they routinely diagnosed patients. The gaze implied an "open field, and its essential activity is of the successive order of reading; it records and totalizes; it gradually reconstitutes immanent organizations" (p. 121). Once knowledge was reiterated to the extent that certain conditions became seemingly self-evident, the gaze was transformed into the "glance." Whereas the gaze totalizes, the glance "does not scan a field; it strikes at one point, which is central or decisive" (p. 121). Foucault explained that the glance instantly distinguishes the essential, going beyond the observable. It "is not misled by the immediate forms of the sensible, for it knows how to traverse them . . . to lift, to release appearance" (p. 121). By nonverbally establishing both a norm and an epistemological structure, the glance formulated an identity that need not be constrained by the strictures of language.

Translating the "glance" to survival strategies appropriated by gay men and lesbians echoes these postulates of control and power. But while institutions utilize surveillance to discipline those in the polity, gays and lesbians cast their glance to capture a sense of control that cannot be fully monitored by the heteronormative culture in which they are immersed. The glance has allowed for an evasive identification with those who do not generally want to be found. Many people who identify as LGBT have learned what "cues" to look for when attempting to locate those who might share common bonds. These cues are based not so much on a static authenticity as they are on the experience of the person casting the glance and the cultural context.[4] Butler (2004) notes the import of such dialogical evocations; people determine their sense of self only to the extent that norms exist to support and enable their identities.

Recalling his boyhood experiences playing baseball, for example, Darsey (2004) recounted the investment of performing his gender:

> Long before we knew its exact nature, long before we were ready to connect it to our genitals, we knew that we were not like most boys; we were frauds, imposters, counterfeits. And this knowledge made us expert "readers," always having to read the text of American boyhood in order to construct our own more or less successful facsimile of it. When, in third grade PE, Rodney Grimmer struck out, he shrugged it off with a bravado that he didn't even have to think about; it was what came naturally to him; it never occurred to him that his masculinity was at stake. When I struck out, however, I was forced to try to imitate Rodney Grimmer's example, hoping, in vain, that I had properly identified the essentials and distinguished them from the simple appurtenances. (pp. 2–3)

Darsey's recollection illustrates not only the pressures that accompany the reiteration of a gendered performance in a normative space, but also how this inspired conceptual tools he needed throughout his life. These structures helped him become a "close reader," a person able to read "in between" the lines to see things—and people—in ways that others might not.

The precarious ground on which this phenomenon rests highlights gaydar's potential to fail. The fluidity inherent in identities has long been recognized by people who are members of marginalized groups. Gays and lesbians have been indebted to (and often trapped by) a number of cultural signs that signal the presence of others who are like them. Those who do not embody specific traits can be equally marginalized by the inability of others to "spot" them. In this sense, anybody could be identified as queer, even though such cues may be deceptive.

Mediating "Reality" and the Televisual Glance

While film studies has an extensive history exploring the "gaze," television scholars often employ the "glance" to explain small screen reception. For Ellis (1982), while the gaze "implies a concentration of the spectator's activity into that of looking, the glance implies that no extraordinary effort is being invested in the activity of looking" (p. 37). Chesher (2003) finds that the glance is useful because of the "structured way of looking" established by television: "[V]iewers' attention can often drift, and has to be drawn back regularly. . . . Content is segmented so that viewers can easily rejoin the narrative at any point." Rather than establish a voyeuristic relationship with subjects, as does the big screen in a theater, television is more fragmented, distracting, and requires less focus. As a medium, television necessitates a familiarity with its structures that allows viewers to recognize particular parts of the narrative, the relationships between people on the screen, and the format of the program they are witnessing. Before a "glance" can be utilized, some degree of epistemological understanding must accompany viewing practices.

Television has embraced a coherent and ontological understanding of sexual orientation, while simultaneously playing up the ambiguous nature of such identities (Doty, 1993). A staple of gay identity on American television, for instance, has been the "straight gay," a figure who appears to be heterosexual in the storyline, but who is eventually revealed as queer. One of the first such representations was featured in the premier season of *All in the Family*, when one of Archie Bunker's drinking buddies divulged that he was gay. In a standard move for television programming, the man was decidedly masculine: a former football player who watched boxing, drank draft beer, and arm wrestled (Tropiano, 2002, p. 188). Such depictions, featuring the "normal" characteristics of gays and lesbians, have been a consistent trope on American television. One only needs to think in passing of the many shows that have featured the "straight gay" including *L.A. Law, the Golden Girls, M*A*S*H*, and *Beverly Hills 90210.* More often than not, the "straight gay" is used to check assumptions about sexuality and inspire a progressive tolerance in heterosexual characters. The persona coming to terms with a gay man or lesbian is often the most narrow-minded on the program, such as Archie Bunker on *All in the Family*, Steve Sanders on *Beverly Hills 90210*, or Frank Burns on *M*A*S*H*.

The consistency of sexuality being represented as simultaneously fluid and ontologically secured does not suggest that no change has transpired over three decades of television programming. Indeed, two significant changes in how sexual

orientation has been represented in regards to gaydar are significant. First, gays and lesbians are often portrayed as having faulty gaydar. Second, television now assumes that heterosexuals can have gaydar. While this evolution marks a more complex relationship between gay and straight cultures, it also has the effect of overlooking difference when exploring culturally specific practices such as gaydar. Having evolved over a variety of television programs, these shifts were seen most clearly on reality shows such as *Boy* and *Playing*.

Representing gaydar as flawed in gays and lesbians has become a new fixture in television programming. In a variety of shows, including *Sex and the City*, *Six Feet Under*, *The L Word*, *Will and Grace*, *Frasier*, and even *Reba*, the gaydar of the queer characters is as prone to failure as the gaydar of heterosexual characters such as Bunker. Over time, viewers are no longer offered lessons in tolerance from the mistakes of closed-minded heterosexuals alone, but offered lessons by well-intentioned characters of all sexual orientations. An example of this turn was illustrated on a popular episode of *Will and Grace* (Burrows, 1999). The storyline featured a new neighbor, Peter, who moved into Will and Grace's building, but whose sexual orientation was unknown. Both Will and Grace struggled to identify Peter's sexual orientation and win his affections. Importantly, they were equally incapacitated when it came to knowing if Peter was gay or straight. When Peter finally discovered that Will and Grace had been baiting him with leading questions to discover his sexual orientation, he offered no definitive conclusion. He left the answer to viewers' imaginations and told both Will and Grace: "to clarify things, you're not my type."

The second shift in the representation of gaydar is the notion that heterosexuals can have it. While straight men and women in the gay community (often known as "dyke tykes," "dutch boys," "fag hags," and "fag stags") have long been thought to possess degrees of gaydar, such abilities are now common on television. On contemporary television programs, one need not have close ties to the gay community to have gaydar. Heterosexual characters on *Friends*, *Will and Grace*, *Murphy Brown*, *Frasier*, *Dawson's Creek*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have professed to have it. Importantly, heterosexual characters are depicted as simply having such abilities, with little or no discussion about how they developed gaydar. This shift is important for viewers because it offers an epistemology that previously was absent. It paves the way for programs such as *Playing* because there is no controversy about whether or not Thomas can have gaydar. Before the first airing of the show, a solid cultural foundation had been established, making the idea of a straight person with few ties to the gay community having gaydar perfectly acceptable.

The 2005 season of the *Real World Philadelphia* demonstrated both aspects of gaydar's evolvement on television. The producers cast Willie, who was immediately identified as gay, and Karamo, who was not. The requisite white southern male, MJ, gave himself "props" for immediately recognizing Willie's sexual orientation, only to be astounded by the revelation that Karamo was not straight. Likewise, Willie seemingly had no idea that Karamo was gay; he found out only when Karamo told him.

Television now regularly falls back on the neoliberal idea that all people are equally unable to spot gays and lesbians, and that all are guilty of reinforcing stereotypes. Reality programming embraced this logic, creating situations where lessons in tolerance could be illustrated among people of varying sexualities. Unlike sitcoms, reality television featured "real" people with the problems that commonly arise when confronting sexual difference. Such shows gave audience members the chance to participate in cultural shifts that were otherwise ubiquitous in everyday life (Baker, 2003; Bondebjerg, 2002). This shift included the heightened visibility of LGBT people and coping mechanisms for dealing with an increasingly diverse population. Audiences came to expect queer representations on reality shows, actively seeking them out when they were not made noticeable (LeBesco, 2002). When no cast member on the *Real World* is identified as gay early in the season, for example, fans often speculate about which person might be concealing their sexuality or whom the producers are keeping in the editing closet.

The remainder of this essay focuses on the dilemma that occurs when shows such as *Boy* and *Playing* employ ambiguity outright, but attempt to equalize the capacities of gay and straight viewers to read cloudy representational markers. Rather than deal with the complexities that accompany various sexual orientations, reality programs strive to highlight similarities which enable assimilative discourses. Although the fluidity of identity is the selling point of shows such as *Boy* and *Playing*, these programs generally recast identities as ontologically secured. Queer practices are hegemonically appropriated for the purposes of comforting audiences.

Boy Meets Boy

Boy featured 15 men competing for the affections of Getzlaff, a young, attractive, and good-natured California human-resources executive. Throughout most of the series, Getzlaff was unaware that nearly half of the participants were heterosexual. Each week, he asked three men to leave, selecting them from pairings predetermined by program producers. Viewers learned the sexuality of the ousted contestants at the end of each episode. But Getzlaff knew nothing about this twist until the final episodes of the season. When only three contestants remained, Getzlaff was informed that if he selected a gay man from the finalists (two of whom were gay, the other straight), he and that person would win a trip, and Getzlaff would receive $25,000. However, if the straight man convinced Getzlaff he was gay, that player would take home the money.

The show capitalized on the blurring of the lines between gender norms and sexuality. The program differed from heterosexual counterparts such as *The Bachelor* in that sexual orientation, not marriage or compatibility, was the defining element of the show. Because it did not readily identify who was "straight" and who was "gay," the program used the mystery of sexual identity to keep viewers in suspense. It challenged audience members to identify aspects of each contestant that marked them as either "gay" or "straight" by calling attention to the norms that enabled the politics of "the glance." Central to this goal was the visual marking of bodies through the use of signs ranging from clothing and hairstyles to vocal patterns and body types.

These cues turned out to be polysemous, as the editing process could be easily manipulated to suggest one sexual identity and elide another.

Many critics, overlooking the importance of editing, proclaimed that the show was progressive, that it broke down the wall between gay and straight men (Cohen, 2003; Hallett, 2003). Rather than focus on the creation of cultural stereotypes, however, the displacement of gaydar in favor of a universal incapacity to ascertain sexuality was made the centerpiece of many approving comments. Positing gaydar as an "imperfect faculty," Cohen said that this development was progressive because it "suggests an evolution in the consciousness of some straight men; and it seems . . . the program did have the effect of shattering stereotypes for both gay and straight viewers" (p. 50). Breaking through stereotypes seemed to level the playing field, ensuring viewers that neither straight people nor members of the LGBT community could reliably identify who might be gay. One reporter remarked that "instead of being at odds with one another, straight and gay men are together playing with traditional notions of sexuality" (Hallett, 2003, p. 38).

Boy producers asserted that they "wanted to test the boundaries between gay and straight, and create a world where the straight people were in the closet" (quoted in Sigesmund, 2003, p. 52). The program's supposed blurring of identity markers allowed it to place straight contestants in the shoes of gay men. After various people were voted off, the heterosexual contestants offered seemingly heart-felt testimonials about the queer identities they adopted and how this experience enabled them to identify with the longings of single gay men looking for love. While firmly maintaining their heterosexual standpoint, their "passing" was equated with the troubles of being in the closet. Andrejevic (2004) notes that reality television "provides a certain guarantee of authenticity, and that this authenticity becomes a process of self-expression, self realization, and self-validation" (p. 108). The heterosexual contestants consistently verified this argument, testifying that they suddenly understood what it was like to be in the closet, simply because they had lied about being gay for a short time. This includes one straight person on *Boy* who was "in the closet" for a few hours. As one heterosexual contestant put it

> My experience here is kind of a mirror image of how people who are in the closet still are experiencing daily life . . . I know that when I go back home it's going to be different, I just have a feeling like I'm going to be seeing things through different eyes.

Repeatedly, however, it was the inaccuracy of gaydar that heterosexual contestants directly tied to the universal need for love and inclusion. One contestant, Paul, asserted: "I never felt like any of my actions raised any eyebrows or flags about my sexuality. I felt accepted and that felt good." Brian A., another heterosexual participant, noted that people think he is gay "based on either what I was wearing or just who I was sitting next to." He continued: "I really learned that you have no idea who is and who isn't and it really doesn't matter. Love everyone for who they are—bottom line as human beings." Taking this line of reasoning one step further, Dan explained that as a heterosexual, he had learned much about gay culture:

> It's not easy trying to fit in when you feel like you have to pretend to be something you're not and in this case I had to pretend to be something that I wasn't. And once it got so emotional and so intense for me, I threw my arms up and said "I can't do this anymore. I need everyone to know who I am." And I think that parallels a transition that a lot of these guys had to go through during their lifetime when they threw their arms up and said, "You know what? I can't do this any more; everyone needs to know exactly who I am—I'm a gay man."

This produced an odd spin on Dow's (2001, p. 126) conception of the televised confessional, with straight men offering a "liberation effect" for queers trapped in the proverbial closet. Regardless of why Getzlaff rejected them, the heterosexual men constantly tied the inability to detect sexuality to tolerance. Importantly, gay men never expressed such sentiments after the show ended.

At least two other aspects of the program merit mention. First, producers said the men selected to compete were already "gay friendly" prior to appearing on the program. The show was not an introduction to gay culture for any of the contestants. The production company combed bars throughout California and purposefully selected contestants who were accepting of gay people. One executive explained that producers asked straight participants questions "to ascertain their social behaviors, political views, and friendships" (quoted in Andreoli, 2003, p. 54). Most of the straight contestants said they had close friends or relatives who were gay. Of course, both the producers and the contestants were likely well intentioned. The fact that they were queer friendly is certainly positive. Nonetheless, the degree to which these men were close to gay people and how that proximity might have produced cultural identifications that allowed them to "play down" their heterosexuality seemed significant. In short, they had a degree of personal experience that allowed them to spot and reproduce cultural practices typically associated with gay men, hence influencing the dialogical process associated with gaydar.

Second, reviewing the episodes reveals that obvious measures were taken to ensure that Getzlaff did not select all gay men and stunt the dramatic narrative. During elimination ceremonies, when contestants were selected by Getzlaff to stay in the game or asked to leave, the producers had a heavy hand in determining the outcome. The men were put in groups of two or three, and Getzlaff chose from those brackets. These groups often consisted of all gay men or all straight guys. Instead of getting free rein to dismiss any of the contestants, Getzlaff's selections were carefully manipulated to ensure that at least one straight man made it to the finals. The producers stacked the deck to guide Getzlaff's choices. Despite the promotional advertising about Getzlaff's gaydar, it played no role until the final round, when he was told that heterosexual men were among the contestants. After revealing the twist, *Boy* host Dani Behr asked, "So, do you feel like your gaydar is a bit rusty?" Getzlaff simply shrugged it off, saying he did not think he needed to have it on.

Once Getzlaff was told about the twist, he briefly speculated about the sexuality of the three remaining men. He almost immediately pegged Franklin as heterosexual. Getzlaff turned out to be correct. He said that his "natural instinct" was to mark Franklin as the straight man. Although the primary broadcast did not elaborate on

this detail, the extended scenes on the DVD showed Getzlaff quickly picking up on Franklin's heterosexuality as he discussed the twist with his best friend, Andra. Significantly, the scenes not aired on television but included on the DVD alluded to a sensibility that helped Getzlaff, while the originally televised version sustained an air of mystery and anxiety. When deliberating about the sexuality of these men seemed insufficient, Getzlaff decided to kiss each of them. Franklin's evasion of the kiss, did more than reveal him as the straight man, it confirmed Getzlaff's assumption that Franklin was heterosexual.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of the series was the management of queer bodies. The only physical contact allowed to contestants was kissing Getzlaff. Their "contract stipulated that the action would go no further, even though other matchmaking shows regularly feature 'overnight dates'" (Sigesmund, 2003, p. 52). Additionally, none of the suitors were permitted to "hook-up," as the focus away from Getzlaff would disrupt the program. On the other hand, unlike the *Bachelor* or *Bachelorette*, there was more potential for the contestants to fall for one another. Ross claimed he established the rules because he did not want the show to be "a big sexual romp and for it to be salacious" and that the producers "really wanted it to be an exploration of sexual politics and not sex" (Andreoli, 2003, p. 53). However, reality television has long relied on "sexual romps" to maintain viewer interest. Programs such as *Survivor*, *Joe Millionaire*, and the *Real World* have been successful in part because of romantic interludes between participants during the shows. *Boy* producers seemed to assume that the gay men were more sexually robust than either their heterosexual counterparts on competing shows or on this series. The rules protected a sanitized approach to sexuality, suggesting that the men could be gay, just not sexually active on the show.[5]

Additionally, many members of the gay community criticized *Boy* for its manipulation of queer men. Half way through the series, one of the gay contestants began to develop feelings for one of the straight men and this was featured on the show. However, because none of the gay men on the program knew that heterosexuals were participating on the program, this ended awkwardly and with considerable disappointment for the participant who had developed the crush. This exploitation of emotions drew fire from the queer community, forcing Ross to justify hiding this particular twist from the gay men on the program. "Why do gay people need to be protected from participating in reality shows with twists?" He argued, "I don't see us as a victimized minority. We're capable of handling this" (quoted in Sigesmund, 2003, p. 52). What Ross did not discuss was the requirement to "protect" the heterosexual men on this show. It is easy to claim that gay people should stop whining about the turns that might transpire on a show such as *Boy*, but those contestants who had knowledge of the twist were in fact those who were being sheltered. The heterosexual participants never had to worry about the authenticity of their sexual identity being called into question because they could not spot other straight men. They did not need to deal with the stigma of having sex with another man. The performance of sexuality could be initially presented as fluid but apparently had to end with an ontological base to reassure viewers.

Playing It Straight

Playing It Straight was a Fox network program similar in form to *Boy*. The program focused on Jackie Thomas, a college student from Wisconsin who was introduced to 14 bachelors competing for her affections. Thomas was depicted as a naïve woman who knew little about gay men. Like Getzlaff, she was attractive, good-natured, and looking for a long-term relationship. The gay man who could effectively deceive her would win one million dollars. If Thomas selected a straight man, the two of them would split the million and potentially pursue a romantic relationship.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the two programs was the point at which the secret of the game was revealed. While *Boy* waited until the final segment of the series to tell Getzlaff that some of the contestants were straight, *Playing* producers told Thomas during the first episode that some participants were gay. Both Thomas and the men, all of whom shared a living space, knew that gay men were competing for a cash prize. This provided for an entirely different competition, imposing a high school locker-room mentality on the living quarters. The men expressed a perpetual homosexual panic; each of them (including the gay men) projected a fear that they might be read as queer. The contestants all seemed unnerved at the prospects that gay men were sleeping and showering in such close proximity to straight men. Knowing that gay men were competing, each person took strides to elude the gaydar of other contestants by playing up heterosexual performances of masculinity. To embody queerness in any form was to invite attention from the other contestants and risk losing the money. Although over-performing masculinity could have been seemingly harmful as well (raising red flags that one was "trying too hard"), this rarely surfaced as a concern among the men. To be read as masculine (and hence straight) was always preferable to the alternative.

Playing was up front about its dealings with gaydar from its inception (see Andreoli, 2004, p. 59). The Web site for the series featured a pink radar screen that blipped as the show was introduced. Each contestant was depicted as being possibly gay or straight by employing a number of contrasting practices that were stereotypically associated as either masculine or effeminate. Of one suitor, Chris, the Web site declared, "He collects cars . . . and Cher albums." Ryan was a boxer who liked pink nail polish. As for John, "Ears turn him on . . . so do musicals." While these blips flash on the Web site, a "sexuality meter" shaped like a scale fluctuated across the top of the page, racing between the words "breeder" and "flaming." Unlike Getzlaff's unknowing contemplations about the men, their personalities, and their compatibilities with him, Thomas concentrated very closely on the gay and straight stereotypes that each man embodied, frequently speculating for the camera about a contestant's habits and tastes. Whereas the contestants on *Boy* walked off the set to confess their sexuality to the viewing audience, on *Playing* each man revealed his sexuality directly to Thomas, the other contestants, and the people watching at home at the moment he was eliminated. As such, the audience was privy to the reactions of all the contestants, who often expressed amazement that a particular player was gay or straight.

The development of surprise in the program's discourse was significant because it detailed a consistency with neo-liberal understandings of subjects as essentially equal to one another. There was value to performing with a sense of surprise throughout the show, as it helped a person advance in the game. All the men, regardless of sexuality, expressed astonishment with each instance of the man being revealed as either gay or straight. Importantly, each of the men had much to gain from expressing alarm. For example, if one of the men did in fact have some sense of who was gay, how would he adequately explain *how* he knew that a particular man was queer? Unlike traditional understandings of the closet, in which heterosexuals can always claim to have some epistemological familiarity of unfettered queer identity, here such revelations were endowed with amazement, not a priori cultural knowledge (Sedgwick, 1990). Producers used the shock experienced by the contestants as visible proof that gaydar was inherently faulty for the audience. Of course, this does not mean that the men did not have varying degrees of gaydar. It simply suggests that producers could edit in shots of surprise from various contestants to ensure that the show retained an element of suspense.

Despite the overtly homophobic atmosphere produced by the composition of the game, *Playing* produced a discourse of equity between gay and straight participants. The inability to spot others seemingly provided a sense of ease because it created a situation in which all other personality traits became central to a person's character. One of the heterosexual bachelors said: "I was in no way worried or concerned about being amongst homosexual men. I found the whole process to be intriguing" (quoted in Andreoli, 2004, p. 59). He said he initially "thought the line that divided me from homosexuals was a very clear and distinct one, yet in the end that line had become so blurry that it was hardly visible" (Andreoli, 2004, p. 59). The qualifier in this sentence—"hardly"—suggests that some degree of division remained in the player's mind, but his new-found standpoint seemingly dismissed that difference.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of *Playing* was its use of the "closet confessional." Just as the *Real World* employed individual interviews in a closed space sealed off from the other roommates, *Playing* featured each contestant in a closet speculating about the sexuality of other cast members. These testimonials were viewed only by the audience; neither Thomas nor the other contestants had access to them. The confessionals repeatedly negotiated the impossibilities associated with gaydar. Repeatedly, the men had conflicting theories about who might and might not be queer. Although viewers had no knowledge of the sexuality of the men testifying, each pointed the finger at various participants, offering a dizzying account of who might have identified as gay. Audience members were equally unable to identify who might be queer and were left questioning whom to trust. The mere fact that each of these men had varying interpretations of what constituted a sign of a particular sexuality flattened the differences among them. The audience never knew what these assessments were based on, only that different people had seemingly different perspectives.

This perpetual surveillance created a hostile atmosphere in which all the men participated in continual efforts to "out" one another. Attempts to lure men out of

the closet were usually conducted with a strong sense of shaming. For example, one of the men on the show, Eddie, got drunk one evening and started "coming on" to another contestant. When Eddie started to make advances on one of the other men, that contestant ran screaming through the house declaring that Eddie was gay. Eddie was apparently so ashamed that he immediately dropped out of the program, deciding against an appearance at the ritual where Thomas likely would have voted him out. He refused any final interviews on camera and crept quietly off the show. The "tolerance" that was supposed to be substantiated on the program by the evasion of gaydar turned in a witch hunt. This shame merely reinforced the marginality of the gay men, adding little to any progressive agenda and reinforcing static identity categories (Sedgwick, 1993). It also illuminated a constant in the lives of queer women and men—imperfect gaydar in the wrong place can produce irreversible harm.

Thomas had a difficult start on *Playing*. By the end of the third episode, she had eliminated three of the five straight men, but only two of the nine gay contestants. Planned activities with individual participants meant to aid her in elimination rounds, such as barnyard dancing galas and breakfast in bed, did not seem to help. Even physically intimate moments meant to assist her in revealing the sexual orientation of contestants were, not surprisingly, ineffective. Thomas had hoped that kissing several of the men would help her distinguish who was gay and who was straight, but this strategy proved futile. Nonetheless, she managed to retain the remaining two heterosexual men until the finale. Of the final three, Thomas selected Banks, a heterosexual contestant whose arm was broken by one of the gay men in an arm wrestling contest during one of the episodes.

Admittedly, *Playing* had some genuinely humorous moments, although these comic elements ultimately enhanced the panic embedded in the show. One unforgettable scene in the program featured the men roasting hotdogs over an open fire. In slow motion, the camera panned up their bodies as they began to consume the phallic objects. In some ways, then, sex and sexuality were discursively developed, but never in politically progressive ways. Ultimately, *Playing* was taken off the air after only a few episodes. Although Jackie selected a winner, the program was canceled before he was revealed because the series failed to attract sufficient Friday night ratings. The remaining five episodes were never broadcast on the network, but were available for purchase and on-line viewing 10 months after the show was terminated. Over a year and a half after *Playing* was canceled, Fox also began broadcasting marathons of the entire series, including the originally unaired episodes, on a Fox channel dedicated exclusively to reality-television programming.[6]

The producers' announcement to the public that Thomas had selected one of the straight men followed a pattern established by *Boy* wherein the central contestant selected a person who enabled them to win the game. This seemed not to support the fluid nature of sexuality suggested in the programs, but reinforced an ontological understanding of sexual orientation. Because only three episodes of *Playing* aired, it is tempting to dismiss it as an insignificant cultural text. However, just as Foucault's notion of the glance need not be accurate to acquire its power, it requires a repetition

of epistemological knowledge to enable its illusory contours. In this way, *Playing* was ineffective as a text for popular consumption but was successful in reproducing a heteronormative logic that asked viewers to literally "buy" into the reiteration of static identities months after it was canceled.

Parting Glances

By fabricating identities for contestants that mixed stereotypical attributes of "gay" and "straight" men, *Boy* and *Playing* produced an ambiguity that has long been a successful selling point of television programming. Unfortunately, both programs abandoned these initial impulses; they followed historical form by upholding static notions of sexual innateness by revealing the contestants as clearly "gay" or "straight," concluding with Getzlaff and Thomas selecting a gay and straight man, respectively. Despite the potential of these programs to create sexually fluid subjects, the shows ultimately sustained the very binaries they aspired to resist. *Boy* upheld traditional understandings of gaydar when James selected Wes, a gay man, as the winner of that show. *Playing* forwarded the assimilative tendencies of television by announcing that Jackie could see through the fog of sexual ambiguity to pick a heterosexual victor. The Fox show suggested that anyone could spot gay men, even if they started with little to no access to the queer community.

While it is tempting to read these programs as significant in the development of a television dating genre that attempted to appeal to both LGBT and heterosexual audiences, neither of these shows was widely successful. Although *Boy* attracted a sizable gay following, it was largely overshadowed by *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a program that visualized (and ultimately commodified) queer sexuality in a much less intimate and threatening manner. But the programs indicate larger hegemonic forces that subtly appropriate elements of queer culture for consuming audiences. *Boy*'s heterosexual contestants, for example, consistently asserted that they understood what it is like to be in the closet, simply because they had lied about being straight for an abbreviated amount of time. Such cannot be said of the queer contestants. On *Boy*, they were unaware of the twist. On *Playing*, they were forced to reproduce the struggles created by being "in the closet."

Just as reality television has been used to define the terms for both race and racism (Kraszewski, 2004), the producers of these programs selectively define both sexuality and the solution to heterosexism. Television's portrayal of gaydar relied on unreflective testimonials, selective footage, and careful editing. However, gaydar is a dialogical phenomenon produced through the reiteration of experience in a particular context, not something that can be easily depicted on screen. It is a subjective aspect of identity, nurtured (or not) by personal experience and community. The utility of gaydar, like the imaginative force of queer theory, lies in its cultural contingency and its impulse to subvert normative posturing in the social world. Butler reminds us that fantasy is not the opposite of reality: "The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality" (p. 29).

Cohen (2003) saw *Boy* as ultimately productive, asserting that it was "primarily about dating and long-term relationships, shattering the canard that our lives are simply about sex" (p. 50). But the marginalization of sexual practices blocked some potentially interesting avenues for exploring identity and difference. While network executives at Bravo were likely attempting to reach a wide audience during *Boy*'s debut season, incorporating more intimate moments of queer sexuality need not be destructive and could open a space for more complex conversations about LGBT communities. *Boy* and *Playing* sanitized sexuality to such a degree that it not only made the shows feel prudish but made them less interesting.

Moreover, each show centered almost exclusively on the construction of white, male sexuality. *Boy* featured only one African American, and he was dismissed by James during the first round. This follows a long lineage of television history rarely featuring LGBT people of color. When queers of color are incorporated into shows like *Boy*, they are usually represented in a manner that connotes tokenism, not as people who are significant to the overall narrative. Ironically, the identifications and disidentifications provided by such voices could complicate notions of gaydar, illustrating how race alters the production and reception of cultural cues. This was certainly the case on the *Real World, Philadelphia*, when Karamo, an African American cast member, came out. He did not identify with the term "gay" or much of "gay culture," but attempted to forge new performances of identity by evoking a sexual identity for the viewing audience that had not yet been seen on the program.

The deleterious effects of maintaining a strict gay/straight dichotomy was evident on *Boy*. When a contestant self-identified as "bisexual" after admitting to having had sex with a woman in the past, he was castigated (it was later revealed that he was making a recovery after he "slipped" and did in fact identify as "straight"). Regardless of his sexuality, the more interesting fallout of this event was his stigmatization by the show's gay men. Many expressed shock, to the point of being personally offended, at the idea that a man who had had sex with a woman had the audacity to appear on the program. This disciplining is not without precedent. Each series echoed historical televisual forms by positioning sexuality as seemingly flexible, but grounded in strict dichotomous categories that identified a person as either straight or gay. While the program longed to advance a seemingly complicated notion of identity as fluid, the responses of the gay men fortified the ontological underpinnings of the narrative. Bisexuality could inspire an interesting dilemma when considering conceptions of gaydar, but no such possibilities existed under the rubric of these shows. Sloop (2004) suggests that "while homosexuality may be devalued, it is more highly valued— because it implies a segregated gender system—than a queered sexuality or gender performance that produces anxiety through confusion" (p. 85).

While seemingly promoting the interests and well-being of stigmatized citizens, these programs do so at the expense of forgetting experiences that have helped people of many ages, races, classes, and sexualities stay alive. With state governments continually finding more reasons to denigrate sexual identities and create more ballot initiatives that perpetuate marginalization, activists and scholars should keep a close eye on efforts that dislocate practices important to queer world-making. As the queer

glance continues to deflect the structural gaze, resistance to these televised norms will be an essential feature to sustaining everyday acts of resistance in those spaces where we are seemingly least likely to be discovered.

Notes

[1]   *Boy*'s producers used the word "mate" to describe the contestants.
[2]   *Boy* was shot over a one-week period in May 2003 in Palm Springs, CA. *Playing* was taped over a three-week period in August 2003, mainly in Lamoille, NV.
[3]   Gaydar is not confined to gay people. So-called "fag hags," straight women who largely hang out with gay men, and other heterosexuals who run in queer circles have professed to have gaydar (Maddison, 2000).
[4]   "Experience" is not meant as the unreflective consciousness of a person immersed in the social world. Scholars such as Joan Scott (1993) have rightfully warned of placing too much faith in the "authenticity" produced by such terminology. Experience in this analysis signifies "a complex semiotic and dialectical process, not simply an unmediated knowledge of self or other" (Yingling, 1997, p. 22).
[5]   While the contestants' bodies and sexualities were carefully managed by the program's producers, sex and sexuality were not wholly absent in *Boy*. Despite the sanitizing of sexuality, discourses of sexuality were plentiful. The men constantly flirted with James (and often one another); scantily clad bodies were seen pool side; and there was even a little kissing. Although this was relatively tame for cable television, discourses were produced that allowed for some discussions of sex and sexuality.
[6]   The "Fox Reality Network" was launched in May 2005. While it was not carried by a number of cable providers, limiting its availability and the prospects for seeing *Playing*, it was offered by companies such as Direct TV and DISH Network.

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